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TO CATCH A HERETIC: AUGUSTINE ON LYING

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Augustine devoted two treatises to the topic of lying, *De Mendacio* and *Contra Mendacium ad Consentium*. The treatises raise interesting questions about what lying is while defending the thesis that all lies are sinful. The first part of this essay offers an interpretation of Augustine's attempts at definition. The second part examines his arguments for the sinfulness of lying used to trap heretics and for the more general thesis that all lying is sinful.

"Tell me, then: what do you believe?"

"My lord, I believe everything a good Christian should...."

"A holy reply! And what does a good Christian believe?"

"What the holy church teaches."

"And which holy church? The church that is so considered by those believers who call themselves perfect, the Pseudo Apostles, the heretical Fraticelli, or the church they compare to the whore of Babylon, in which all of us devoutly believe?"

"My lord," the cellarer said, bewildered, "tell me which you believe is the true church. . . ."

"I believe it is the Roman church, one, holy, and apostolic, governed by the Pope and his bishops."

"So I believe," the cellarer said.

"Admirable shrewdness!" the inquisitor cried. "Admirable cleverness de dicto. You all heard him: he means to say he believes that I believe in this church, and he evades the requirement of what he believes in!"

Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

The implacable Bernard Gui knows the wiles of heretics. Remigio the cellarer, the heretic Gui seeks to expose, will do almost anything to avoid telling a lie. Remigio attempts to exploit an ambiguity. One implication of "So I believe" is "I believe the same thing." Remigio indeed intends his audience to interpret his utterance in that way. But what the utterance really conveys, by Remigio's lights, is his endorsement, not of the content of Gui's belief, but of the sincerity of Gui's expression of it.

The dialogue is fictional; Bernard Gui is not. Gui really was a Dominican inquisitor, pressed into fictional service in Eco's tale of fourteenth-century

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intrigue. And although the dialogue is fictional, it is not a pure flight of fancy. It captures what could have transpired between a wily heretic and a shrewd inquisitor. Remigio's tactic is a specimen of what was called, naturally enough, "equivocation."[1] The tactic is in service of a strategy, which might be expressed as follows: Do not lie in order to conceal the truth if you can mislead your adversary by other, evasive means. The strategy in turn is sanctioned by the principle that lying is always, without exception, morally wrong, whereas certain kinds of evasive techniques can be right, wrong, or morally neutral, depending on the circumstances. (One such technique, for example, is to answer a question with a question or request, as when Remigio says, "Tell me which you believe is the true church.")

Eco's dialogue does not happen to illustrate this constraint as it applies to Gui. But no inquisitor of Gui's stature could have failed to be aware of and obedient to the doctrine against lying laid out in Augustine's *Contra Mendacium ad Consentium* (hereinafter referred to as '*CM*'). The work was written in 422 to address the issue whether it was permissible to use entrapment techniques to identify Priscillianists, a heretical sect with Manichaean leanings. Augustine's opinion is a resoundingly clear endorsement of the principle that lying is always wrong, even when—especially when—employed to smoke out heretics.

Although Augustine makes it abundantly clear in *CM* and in his earlier *De Mendacio* (hereinafter, '*DM*')[2] that he subscribes to the principle that lying is always wrong, he is less forthcoming about *why* lying is wrong. Nor, I shall argue, does he supply a clear account of what lying *is*, in distinction from other kinds of deceptive practices. These two projects, justification of the principle and definition of the concept, are not unrelated. It might be, for instance, that if one delimits the notion of a lie narrowly enough, one will thereby make defense of the principle easier. I shall begin by surveying Augustine's remarks on definition.

What Are Lies?

Here is a trio of passages, two from *DM* and one from *CM*. The translations are subject to modification as we proceed.

(A) In *DM* 3.3 Augustine allows that just as a person who says what is false may not be lying, so long as she believes that what she says is true, so a person who tells the truth may nonetheless be lying, if he believes that what he is saying is false. As if in anticipation of our incredulous stares regarding the second claim, Augustine hastens to add: "For he is to be judged as lying or not lying by the intention (*sententia*) of his own soul, not by the truth or falsity of the things themselves."

(B) In *DM* 4.5 Augustine says that "No one doubts that he lies who willingly states what is false for the purpose of deceiving (*causa fallendi*)," and that therefore it is obvious that a lie is a "false statement put forward with a will to deceive (*enuntiatem falsam cum voluntate ad fallendum prolatum*)." He then immediately adds, "But whether this alone is a lie, is another question."

(C) In *CM* 12.26 Augustine says that a lie is a "false signification with a will to deceive" (*falsa significatio cum voluntate fallendi*).

The first thing that may strike the reader of these passages is that they

appear to be inconsistent. (B) and (C) comport with each other well enough. Their separation in composition by twenty-six years makes a strong case for saying that they represent Augustine's settled opinion on the matter. The odd one out is (A). We could try to admit (B) and (C) as part of the Augustinian canon and dismiss (A) as an aberration, were it not for the fact that (A) is located in such close proximity to (B), separated from it by approximately four standard-size pages. To dismiss (A) we would have to suppose not merely that Augustine nodded but that he fell asleep at the wheel. The last sentence of (B) throws out a bit of an interpretative lifeline. It encourages us to think that although a false statement put forward with a will to deceive is the paradigm or most salient case of a lie, there may be other cases of lying that do not fit that mold. Perhaps then the kind of case described in (A) can be tolerated. However, (A) does not just nibble at the periphery of the opinion put forward in (B) and (C). The case described in (A) flouts one-half of what (B) and (C) maintain, namely, that a lie involves a false statement or signification.

There is a way of harmonizing the three passages. The way I am going to suggest will also help us to see the rationale behind Augustine's position that lying is always wrong.

The first thing to do is to examine more closely the translations in (B) and (C). Both of them make crucial use of the term, *voluntas*. I have translated it as 'will', a term that descends etymologically from the Latin *volo*. The problem is that *voluntas* is as ambiguous in Latin as 'will' is in English. A will to deceive can simply be a desire to deceive, and that is how the translators of *DM* and *CM* in the *Fathers of the Church* series have chosen to translate *voluntas* in (B) and (C).[3] On this translation, then, Augustine's definition of a lie is this:

(D1) A lie is a false statement put forward with a desire to deceive.

(D1) is a definition whose deficiency can be demonstrated by means of examples that Augustine himself provides. Suppose that I were to tell you that Burlington is the capital of Vermont under the following circumstances. (1) What I say is false: Vermont's capital is Montpelier. (2) I sincerely believe that Burlington is the capital. (3) I indeed have a desire to deceive you but, ashamed by the baseness of that desire, I came to have a stronger desire not to deceive you, and it was the stronger desire that triggered my utterance. Now if just conditions (1) and (2) applied in this case, I think we would agree that although I misinformed you, I did not lie. (I may still be guilty of other lapses in this case, such as speaking too confidently on the basis of insufficient research.) The addition of condition (3) does not alter the verdict. The operative desire was the desire not to deceive, even though, seething cauldron of conflicting passions that I am, the desire to deceive persisted. The desire to deceive accompanied my false statement, yet I did not lie. So the definition of a lie as a false statement put forward with a desire to deceive is inadequate.

Nor is there an obvious patch that repairs the definition. The one most likely to suggest itself is this:

(D2) A lie is a false statement *effectively motivated* by a desire to deceive.

What (D2) maintains is that for an utterance to count as a lie, the desire to deceive must be in the driver's seat, so to speak; it must be the desire one would correctly cite in answer to the question, "What prompted her to say that?" Now the problem with (D2) is that many lies are not so motivated. Augustine knows this very well. He supplies us with a rich variety of counterexamples to the thesis that lies must be effectively motivated by a desire to deceive. A person can lie in circumstances in which the effective desire is a desire to seek someone else's salvation (*DM* 8.11 and *CM passim*), or to conceal one's religious, moral or political convictions in a hostile society (*CM* 2.2), or to prevent someone else from committing greater sins (*CM* 9.20), or to protect the innocent (*CM* 10.23 and 15.32), or to keep a shocking truth from someone who will not be able to bear it (*CM* 18.36).

We can press this line of thought further. In *DM* 11.18 Augustine distinguishes the *mentiens* from the *mendax*. Call them, respectively, the raconteur and the mythomaniac. The raconteur lies reluctantly, that is, she has no desire to lie, and would prefer to tell the truth, but she also prefers pleasing her listeners with harmless lies over remaining silent. In contrast the mythomaniac "truly loves to lie and frequently indulges his soul in the pleasure of lying." There are two points worthy of note here. First, the raconteur's lying conflicts with what she most wants to do, namely, please her listeners by telling them truths. Since she cannot please them by telling them truths, pleasing them by lying is, by her lights, the next best thing. Augustine's claim about reluctance generalizes: we can say on his behalf that an agent acts reluctantly whenever she does what she does not most want to do. This conception of reluctance is at odds, to be sure, with a maneuver in a priori psychology that maintains that in general, whatever people do is what they most want to do; otherwise they would not do it. Thus because the raconteur did tell lies, telling lies must be what she most wanted to do. I see nothing to commend this maneuver. Centuries after Augustine's time but in the spirit of Augustine's moral psychology, Peter Abelard pointed out that inferences like 'She wanted to lie from a desire to please her audience; therefore she wanted to lie' are invalid. She need have *no* desire to lie, a fortiori no effective desire to lie. She may very well regard her lying as something she must endure in order to achieve what she really does want, namely, the attention and admiration of her audience.[4]

Many cases of lying will thus be cases of reluctant lying; many of them will be tinged with regret that some other course of action was unavailable or even more unacceptable. But perhaps not all. For—this is the second point—the mythomaniac lies whole-heartedly: if anybody fills the bill of lying effectively motivated by a desire to deceive, it will be the mythomaniac. Surely, however, the genuine mythomaniac is or is close to being a psychopath. Till Eulenspiegel and Don Juan are literary approximations. But if we have to scour the resources of legend to find our best examples, that suggests that the phenomenon of lying effectively motivated by a desire to deceive may not be all that common, certainly not as common as lying reluctantly.

I suggest, then, that we do Augustine a disservice by translating *voluntas* as 'desire'. That translation requires us to suppose not only that Augustine's attempt at definition fails but that Augustine himself obligingly supplies us with the materials necessary to chart its failure. We search in the wrong place if we rummage through the closet of desires in an attempt to locate a definition of lying. I want to argue for an alternative translation of *voluntas*, one that makes a stronger case for Augustine. *Voluntas* can also mean 'intention'. Under that translation Augustine's definition is this:

(D3) A lie is a false statement put forward with an intention to deceive.

How does this help? It can help only if there is some significant philosophical difference between desires and intentions. And there is. Our desires come to us unbidden (but not necessarily unwelcome). We generally have no more direct voluntary control over them than we do over our ordinary beliefs. Just as my beliefs can be inconsistent, my desires can conflict with each other: the satisfaction of one can logically preclude the satisfaction of others. In contrast, many intentions are arrived at voluntarily. And although desire-conflict betokens merely a less than optimal psychic order, a conflict of intentions would be a symptom of a breakdown of rationality. You can understand someone who says "I want to ϕ and I want not to ϕ" ("I want to have the crème brûlée and I want not to have the crème brûlée"). That is the stuff of which human frailty is made. Now try to fathom what could be going on internally with someone who said, in all seriousness, "I intend to ϕ and I intend not to ϕ." One might be able to interpret this diachronically, as "I intend to ϕ and *then* I intend not to ϕ" ("I intend to live the life of a wastrel until 30; I intend after that to put aside my prodigal ways"). But if the avowal is interpreted synchronically, its speaker beggars comprehension.

The reason for the lack of parallel between conflicting desires and conflicting intentions is not far afield. Our garden-variety desires, like our garden-variety perceptual beliefs, are more or less just *there*, taking up residence in our psyches. We do not fabricate them so much as we find them. (Of course some desires are not garden-variety but rather the product of cultivation, such as a preference for Cabernet Sauvignon over Merlot. But then so are some perceptual beliefs, like the belief that the painting before me is an early Monet.) Our intentions, however, are more the product of fabrication. Our desires are an essential building material: it is hard to see how a being who had no desires whatsoever could have any intentions. Intentions are not merely fancy (or fancier) desires. They are more like plans of action whose function is to satisfy some desires (or, in the unhappy dispensation, to thwart some desires), plans that the agent will act on if the circumstances are right.

Augustine saw this clearly by the time he came to write *DM*. In *De Sermone Domini in Monte*, written two years before *DM*, he introduced a trio of concepts, suggestion, pleasure, and consent, that he regarded as critical to the analysis of sin.[5] A suggestion is a representation in a person's mind, quite often brought about by some external set of circumstances. The

representation is of some possible state of affairs whose actualization would typically involve the person's agency. The person may or may not take pleasure in the suggestion. It is at this point that desires will arise. To consent to the suggestion is to intend to bring about its associated state of affairs should the opportunity arise (*De Sermone Domini in Monte* 1.12.34).

This conceptual apparatus provides good reason for accepting the intentional translation of *voluntas*, thereby imputing to Augustine definition (D3). But there is more work to be done if we are to determine whether the definition is acceptable to us and to Augustine.

It is useful to compare Augustine's fifth-century (D3) with a twenty-first century definition:

> (D4) A lie is "an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with regard to that content."[6]

Augustine's (D3) and Williams's (D4) converge on the importance of an intention to deceive. They diverge on two other points. First, (D3) specifies that the statement must be false and is silent on the question whether the speaker must believe the statement to be false. (D4) focuses on the speaker's belief to the exclusion of the truth-value of the statement. Second, (D3) simply refers to an intention to deceive that accompanies the false statement. (D4) explicitly ties the intention to the content of the statement.

Consider the first difference first. For all that (D3) says, it might seem that the speaker could believe of the false statement that it is true. Or is this not even a possibility, given that the speaker is bent on deception? In analogous fashion, for all that (D4) says, the assertion that the speaker believes to be false might be true. Has the speaker then failed to lie, contrary to his intention? We can and perhaps should ring the changes here on the truth-value of the statement and the speaker's belief about the statement in order to test (D3) and (D4). Let us set aside cases in which the speaker has no doxastic attitude vis-à-vis the statement,[7] and consider just those cases in which the speaker either believes that the statement is true or believes that the statement is false. And let us hold fixed the assumption that the speaker intends to deceive the hearer, allowing for the intention, however, to be articulated further in light of the cases. Finally, let us press into service the hapless Remigio. There are, then, four possibilities open to Remigio:

(1) The statement is true and Remigio believes that the statement is true.
(2) The statement is true and Remigio believes that the statement is false.
(3) The statement is false and Remigio believes that the statement is true.
(4) The statement is false and Remigio believes that the statement is false.

For the sake of convenience, I shall refer to (1)-(4) almost always as cases though they are, more strictly speaking, *types* of cases. Case (4), about which little needs to be said, is the standard case of a lie. Let us turn our attention to cases (1) and (3). They are startling in that they suppose that Remigio, who has set out on a path of deception, believes that the statement being used, the vehicle of that deception, is true. A non-startling hypothesis that shows the possibility of a type-(1) case is case (1′): Remigio utters a true statement, say, "Montpellier is the capital of Hérault," to a hearer who Remigio believes distrusts him. Remigio counts on the distrust leading the hearer to come to believe that Montpellier is not the capital of Hérault.[8] Another non-startling hypothesis that would exemplify cases (1) and (3) is that Remigio is employing a relatively long-range strategy to overcome the present suspicions that the hearer harbors towards Remigio, to gain the hearer's trust thereby, in order that Remigio might succeed in deceiving the hearer about some more significant item at a future date. These instantiations of cases (1) and (3) can be labeled (1*) and (3*), respectively. Remigio's present attempt at spreading the truth might thus be construed as a "loss leader." Under this interpretation of Remigio's actions, case (3*) shows Remigio to be somewhat inept. But should any of these cases, (1′), (1*), and (3*), be counted as cases of lying?

In case (3*) Remigio puts forward a false statement and Remigio has an intention to deceive. One may be disinclined, however, to call this a lie, and not simply because Remigio believes the statement to be true. It is rather that the intention to deceive is not connected in the right way to Remigio's present utterance. We might distinguish here between remote and proximate intentions. A remote intention is an intention presently held by an agent, whose realization is at some time in the future, requiring a chain of events to bring it about. We are to suppose that some of the links on the chain are the products of other intentions of the agent, functioning as means in service of the remote intention. These other intentions are proximate intentions, although nothing prevents some of them from being remote themselves, relative to other, more proximate intentions on the chain. It can happen that some proximate intentions involve outcomes quite different in kind from the outcome envisioned in the remote intention. But the proximate outcomes are no less genuinely intended for all that. Wanda's ultimate goal is to live a life of ease by the time she turns fifty. She may nevertheless embark, at the age of thirty, on a career that she knows will be fraught with hardships because she believes that the career is an effective means to her goal. The proximate hardships are really intended (but probably not really desired!) for the sake of the remote goal. In similar fashion, Remigio's present proximate intention can be not to deceive even though Remigio's present remote intention is to deceive and even though the proximate intention is in service of the remote intention.

Thus if we think it is correct to clear Remigio of charges of lying in case (3*), we should also think that Augustine's definition (D3) leaves the notion of an intention to deceive too indeterminate. Although Williams does not tarry to offer a rationale for incorporating into (D4) the constraint that the intention to deceive must be directed at the content of the assertion, the incorporation explains how type-(3) cases can involve a false state-

ment, be tainted with deception, yet not be cases of lying. And if case (3*) is judged not to be a lie, it seems that case (1*) should also not be so judged. That leaves case (1′). In (1′) Remigio is counting on his hearer's distrust to lead the hearer to believe of a true statement that it is false. A case of intentional deception, to be sure. But can one lie by telling the truth? While there is nothing in Williams's (D4) that precludes the possibility, one might think, reasonably enough, that Augustine's (D3) does rule it out. Yet it is Augustine who tells us in passage (A) that a person can lie by telling the truth. The case Augustine explicitly cited in (A) was a type-(2) case, in which the speaker believes that what he says is false. But the rationale Augustine offers for classifying case (2) as a lie makes it tempting also to number case (1′) among the lies: "For he is to be judged as lying or not lying by the intention of his own soul, not by the truth or falsity of the things themselves." Has Augustine embraced principles that result in inconsistency? On the one hand, (D3) requires a false statement, which (1′) lacks; on the other, passage (A) does not merely waive (D3)'s requirement, it *rejects* the requirement.

One might try to reconcile Augustine's views by maintaining that although case (2) is a lie by the light of passage (A), (1′) is not. Before we see an argument for discriminating between case (2) and case (1′) in this way, we should keep in mind that even if the argument is successful, we have not thereby addressed the issue of how to square Augustine's verdict in passage (A) on case (2) with his (D3) definition, which requires a false statement, not merely a (true) statement believed to be false.

By hypothesis, in both cases (1′) and (2) Remigio is out to get his hearer to believe a falsehood. That may or may not be behavior for which we have sympathy on Remigio's part: it depends on why Remigio wants to deceive the hearer and, in case (1′), why the hearer is distrustful.[9] Setting those issues aside, we have to acknowledge in case (2) that Remigio believes that he is telling a falsehood and that he intends to deceive his hearer about the content of his assertion. By any reasonable account, everything *internally* required for lying has been met. It is just that in case (2) the world did not cooperate with Remigio; what he succeeded in doing outwardly was to tell the truth, unbeknownst to himself and no doubt contrary to his wishes. That Remigio is not numbered among the liars *externally* is thus a matter of moral luck. Let us say, then, that case (2) is a case of an *internal lie*. And let us say that a *necessary* condition for an assertion's counting as an *external lie* is that the assertion be false. This way of treating case (2) comports with the sentiment expressed in passage (A). However, the internal conditions present in case (2) are only partly met in case (1′). In particular, Remigio does not believe that his statement is false. If we insist that for something to count as an internal lie, the speaker must both believe that what he says is false and intend to deceive the hearer about the content of the assertion, then case (1′) qualifies as neither an internal nor an external lie.

It may have occurred to you that the notion of an internal lie recapitulates Williams's (D4) and that the notion of an external lie picks up the feature of Augustine's (D3) not already explicit in (D4). That suggests putting forward the following hybrid definition of a *full-blown lie*, a lie that is both an internal and external lie:

(D5) A full-blown lie is (a) a false statement, (b) the content of which the speaker believes to be false, (c) which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with regard to that content.

Recall the tantalizing remark Augustine makes immediately after the presentation of his (D3) definition from *DM* 4.5, cited in passage (B): "But whether this [(D3)] alone is a lie is another question." Augustine has special reason to regard internal lies as genuine lies even though they are not full-blown lies or lies picked up by (D3). In *De Continentia*, a work written shortly before *DM*, Augustine amplified his conception of intention as consent to produce an audacious account of sin. The amplification has three components. The first component is that consent to something that is forbidden by God is necessary for a sin to have been committed. That is, no sin is unintentional. The second component is that to consent to something forbidden by God *is* to commit a sin, even if external circumstances should prevent the consent from being translated into action. That is, to intend to do what is forbidden by God is sufficient for having already committed a sin. The third component maintains that one's consent to ϕ, when ϕ is forbidden by God, convicts one, in the eyes of God, of the sin of ϕing. That is, if one intends to murder, for example, then one is guilty of the sin of murder, by God's accounting, not just attempted murder, even if the killing is never carried out! (*De Continentia* 2.3-5.)[10] We can now see why Augustine calls case (2) a lie in passage (A). Even had Remigio uttered nothing, his belief and intention in case (2) are sufficient to qualify him as a liar. The fact that he actually uttered a truth does not alter the verdict, any more than the fact that Jones unwittingly used a toy weapon would clear Jones of a charge of assault.

Why, then, the emphasis on the official-looking definition, (D3), when (D3) does not acknowledge the existence of internal lies? The context in which *DM* passage (B) is embedded makes it clear that (D3) is intended to pick out only the most salient, public lies. And the practical and pressing concern that dominates the discussion in *CM*, namely, the use of full-blown lies to trap heretics, makes a discussion of internal lies something of a luxury.

I think the most sympathetic interpretation of Augustine's views on defining the notion of a lie is that lies divide into two sorts. There are internal lies and there are full-blown lies. Full-blown lies are defined by (D5), and I suppose on Augustine's behalf that clause (b) and the more precise clause (c) of (D5) are clauses that Augustine would be happy to add to his (D3). Internal lies satisfy clauses (b) and (c) of (D5) but not clause (a). They can fail to satisfy clause (a) in either of two ways. The speaker can say nothing or the speaker can say something that is true, not false. Described in this way, internal lies can seem to be truncated, lies that never make the big time in the external world. They are, nevertheless, in Augustine's view, morally serious.

Why Are Lies Always Wrong?

It is one thing to maintain that lying used to uncover heretics is wrong, another to argue that *all* lying is wrong. Augustine espouses both theses, sometimes relying on the second thesis to argue for the first. I shall begin

by looking at his strategy for arguing for the first thesis, then turn my attention to the second.

One way of seeing what Augustine is up to in *CM* is to imagine his correspondent, Consentius, putting forward or at least wondering about the following *Permissibility Thesis*:

(PT) If x's doing ϕ for the sake of ψ will have better consequences than x's not doing ϕ, then it is permissible for x to do ϕ for the sake of ψ.

When the contemplated activity is lying for the sake of uncovering heretics, Consentius might suppose that the betterment to be achieved is twofold. Orthodox Christians will be insulated from the potentially baneful influence of heretics feigning orthodoxy while insinuating blasphemous doctrines. And the heretics themselves, once exposed, will have the opportunity of recanting the heresy that stymies their prospects for salvation.

(PT) is not to be confused with cruder versions of act-utilitarianism that maintain that if x's doing ϕ will have better consequences than x's not doing ϕ, then x's doing ϕ is obligatory. It is not (PT)'s ambition to tell us what our duties are. (PT) simply alleges a sufficient condition for an action's not being forbidden. Even so, Augustine rejects (PT) and, for good measure, argues against the likelihood of the two supposed benefits being delivered by a policy of lying.

Augustine's brief against (PT) takes the following form. There are some types of action whose goodness or badness depends on the reasons for which the agent performs them. Call these types of action "intrinsically neutral." Volunteering to work in a soup kitchen is laudable if the intention is to aid the unfortunate; an act of cynical manipulation if undertaken as a publicity stunt. There are other types of action that remain sins no matter what reason might be given for committing them. Let us call these types of action "intrinsically sinful." Augustine's examples are theft, debauchery, and blasphemy: the purpose of *CM* is to demonstrate that lying is also on the list (*CM* 7.18).[11]

Before proceeding further, we should note that Augustine does not do what we might have expected him to do—complete his taxonomy of actions by specifying types of actions that are intrinsically good, good no matter for what reason they are performed. It could be that, because *CM* is out to consign lies to the category of intrinsically sinful acts, Augustine saw no need to introduce the intrinsically good ones. But I suspect that there is a deeper reason. Augustine may have thought there *are* no intrinsically good actions. Suppose that we try to name one. Surely working for someone else's salvation would be a likely candidate. But if I work for your salvation because I think it will confer earthly power on me, then my action is tainted by my (no doubt confused and foolish) reason for acting. If this conjecture is correct, then there is a kind of asymmetry between the good and the bad as these notions apply to actions. Some actions are intrinsically bad (or intrinsically wrong) but no action is intrinsically good (or intrinsically right).[12]

Augustine need have no quarrel with (PT) when 'ϕ' and 'ψ' range over intrinsically neutral actions, but he will deny (PT) in cases in which either or both of the variables range over actions that are intrinsically sinful. The case against both ϕ and ψ being intrinsically sinful is obvious. A person's stealing in order to sustain his debauchery is doubly wrong and two

wrongs do not make a right. Consider now the case in which 'ϕ' picks out an intrinsically neutral act-type while 'ψ' picks out an intrinsically sinful act-type. Working in the soup kitchen in order to poison one of the customers might pass muster by the lights of (PT) if the customer is a fiend, but will not be endorsed by Augustine.

Consider finally a case in which 'ϕ' picks out an intrinsically sinful type of action, and suppose that 'ψ' picks out an intrinsically neutral act-type. Stealing from Peter to pay Paul is still theft, no matter how rich and base Peter is or how poor and noble Paul is; circumstances and motives cannot make a theft not to be a theft. This latter kind of pattern—ϕ intrinsically sinful, ψ intrinsically neutral—matches lying for the sake of unmasking heretics. Even if doing ϕ for the sake of ψ were to have better consequences than not doing ϕ, doing ϕ would remain impermissible, thus falsifying (PT). Or so Augustine wants to claim. But there are two gaps in this procedure. He has justified neither the thesis that some types of action are intrinsically sinful nor the dependent thesis that lies are included among the intrinsically sinful types of action. What we get instead are arguments denying the alleged beneficial effects of heretic entrapment by mendacious means. Those arguments at first appear to be independent of the argument against (PT). In fact, they, too, depend on the thesis that some types of action are intrinsically sinful. In what follows I shall highlight in boldface the turns in the arguments that depend on the thesis.

Let us first examine the defense of lying that maintains that by exposing heretics by deceitful means we prevent them from spreading their heresy and provide the occasion for their reform. Augustine's attack on this defense takes the form of a cost-benefit analysis. When heretics lie to orthodox Christians, feigning orthodoxy, orthodox Christians are not harmed because what they hear is the truth. Orthodox Christians who lie to heretics, falsely endorsing heretical beliefs, risk entrenching the heretics in their heresy and winning new converts to that heresy, in direct proportion to their effectiveness at deceit. **Moreover, when orthodox Christians reveal their true beliefs at the conclusion of a campaign of deceit, their pattern of duplicity tends to confirm in heretics the erroneous opinion that lying is sometimes permissible** (*CM* 3.4-5), along with distrust about whether the orthodox are telling the truth *now* (*CM* 4.7). A comparison between the sincere heretic and the dissembling orthodox believer actually tells in favor of the heretic. The former merely (though perhaps dangerously) *believes* mistakenly; the latter *knowingly* broadcasts falsehoods about a religion that confesses the Truth (*CM* 5.8-9 and 6.12)

The tally does not end there. Further difficulties emerge when we examine the heretic-hunter who knowingly lies. The content of his lies will be sufficient to qualify them as blasphemy. It is no defense for him to say that he was only pretending to blaspheme; that the words on his tongue were not the words in his heart. As Augustine points out, it was not open to Peter, when he denied Christ, to claim that he was only pretending to deny Christ (*CM* 6.13). Augustine's point is worth amplifying a bit. There are communication contexts in which the norm of truth-telling is suspended. Augustine mentions jokes as an example (*DM* 2.2), to which we can add novels and plays. Pretending is also one such context, at least partly so. There is a kind

of pretending in which all parties affected are "in on" the pretense. Children's play, in which every child pretends to be a space alien, or a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is a prime example. Another kind of pretending, however, is unilateral. In an effort to impress someone I have just met I might pretend to be a Nobel laureate in philosophy. If the person is not in on my pretense, the pretense is unilateral. Because not all parties in unilateral pretending are on the same cognitive footing, unilateral pretending is more open to abuse and therefore to moral criticism. Its consequences to the factually ignorant victims can range from minor annoyance through humiliation up to loss of life. As the consequences grow more severe, the perpetrator's "I was only pretending" defense rings more hollow. But apart from consideration of consequences, the "I was only pretending" defense can be false, even when the speaker really was seeking only to pretend. Sometimes to pretend to ϕ *is* to ϕ. J. L. Austin pointed out that the only convincing way to pretend to be washing windows while casing a joint is to be actually washing the joint's windows. And in some social settings merely to pretend a show of vulgarity is, alas, to be vulgar.[13] The moral appraisal of the perpetrator can thus vary with the severity of the consequences to the victims, but it need not vary only along that dimension. In particular, one might justifiably regard the perpetrator's pretense as censurable even if no harm or embarrassment were to befall the victim.

We can now put Augustine's point this way. It does no good to try to assimilate the practice of lying to heretics to a case of unilateral pretending, because to pretend to blaspheme *is* to blaspheme, and **there are no circumstances in which blasphemy is permissible**. Thus the lying heretic-hunter places his soul in terrible jeopardy.

Augustine has more in store for the prospective undercover heretic-deceiver. Recall (PT). Hold 'ψ' fixed to the act-type *uncovering heretics*. Hitherto we have coupled 'ψ' with 'ϕ' when 'ϕ' was held fixed to the act-type *lying*. One of Augustine's strategies is to allow 'ϕ' to vary over other act-types, such as *committing adultery*. If (PT) allows lying to capture heretics on grounds of better consequences, then it also allows committing adultery to capture heretics on the same grounds (*CM* 7.17). **For that matter (PT) allows the commission of any intrinsically sinful action as long as it has better consequences than not committing it would have**. If we now let 'ψ' vary in tandem with 'ϕ', and **assume that some intrinsically sinful action types are worse than others**, we will get the results, according to Augustine, that in typical circumstances it is permissible to commit theft to prevent someone else from committing debauchery, to commit debauchery to prevent someone else from committing incest, and to commit incest to prevent someone else from doing whatever is worse than incest. These are examples of what Augustine calls "compensatory sins" (*compensativa peccata*), sins a person undertakes to thwart some other person from committing more grievous sins (*CM* 9.20). **The seductive power of their aura of self-sacrifice is such that one can come to hold the erroneous opinion, not merely that they are permissible under (PT), but that they are praiseworthy and justified in themselves** (*CM* 9.20, 10.23). As a consequence a zealous Christian may come to believe that undertaking the sin of lying in order to prevent the sins that flow from heresy is either

obligatory or supererogatory.

But this way lies madness. If compensatory sins are justified, then a conscientious person will find herself vulnerable to the tyrant who incessantly threatens to commit greater sins unless she commits lesser sins (*DM* 6.9 and *CM* 9.20). **If she acquiesces in the sin, it is still a sin even though it prevents a greater sin from occurring** (*CM* 9.20, 9.22). And *she* has sinned, not the tyrant, although the tyrant may be guilty of a separate sin of coercion. But if she does nothing and the tyrant carries out his threat, his sin is not imputable to her. Even if it is true that he would not have done ψ if she had done ϕ, that does not entail that she is a partner to his doing ψ. As Augustine points out, it might be true that the burglars would not have broken down my door if I had left it unlocked, but when they do break the door down because it was locked, I am not a party to their destruction (*DM* 9.14).

Augustine thus believes that he has shown that there is no obligation to commit compensatory sins. He also argues for the stronger thesis that we are obligated not to sin, even compensatorily. The Second Great Commandment, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, does not require that we love our neighbors *more* than ourselves; the person who interprets it that way "exceeds the rule of sound doctrine" (*DM* 6.9). Augustine's point is that to sacrifice one's own eternal life by sinning, even if that were the *only* way to secure someone else's eternal life—a circumstance Augustine is inclined to regard as impossible—is to treat oneself as less than a child of God.[14]

This completes Augustine's case against the so-called benefits of lying to expose heretics. As I have tried to indicate, the case is shot through with steps that presuppose the existence of a class of intrinsically sinful actions, a class that includes all acts of lying. You will search in vain, however, in *DM* and *CM* for justification for the claim that some types of action are intrinsically sinful or for the claim that lying is such a type. Why is that? I suggest that for Augustine, the answer is too obvious for words. Both works were composed for Christian audiences, who could be expected to be guided by the commandments of love, to be sure, but also by the Ten Commandments. I suggest then, that Augustine's opinion would be that the types of action explicitly forbidden by the Ten Commandments are intrinsically sinful, that what makes them intrinsically sinful is their being contrary to the commandments of love, and that what validates the commandments of love is that they issue from a perfectly good and loving God.[15]

If this is the sort of opinion that Augustine would enunciate, then there is an obvious challenge to it coming from within the ranks of conscientious Christians. "On some occasions," some will say, "the commandments of love dictate that we should lie. Even though we might concede that lying should never be used to trap heretics, there are cases in which it would be needlessly cruel not to lie. We adherents to the commandments of love thus should view the commandment not to bear false witness to be compatible with the telling of some lies."

As if in anticipation of this challenge, Augustine raises the following case. You are asked by a patient whose life is threatened by a serious illness whether her only child is alive or not. You know that the child has died. You also believe that if you tell her the truth, it will kill her, but, we may

suppose, if you do not tell her the truth, she will survive. You can choose among three answers, "He is dead," "He is alive," and "I do not know." Any other verbal maneuver will be interpreted by the patient as an attempt to deflect the question and thus as an admission that the child has died. (Unlike the case in which an officer of an invading army of oppression asks you whether you know the whereabouts of any freedom fighters, you cannot take the heroic high road and say "Yes, I do, but I refuse to tell you." If it were given to the patient, that answer would inform her that her son is dead.) So, you can either tell her truth, ensuring her demise, or you can lie, aiding her recovery.

Augustine says of the arguments for lying in a case like this that he is moved by them "more powerfully than wisely" (*CM* 18.36). The temptation to lie in such a case is so great that Augustine himself seems uncertain about whether he could resist it. One thing he is certain about, however, is that if he were to succumb to temptation even here, he would be committing a sin. Our imperfect human condition inclines us to identify the irresistible with the permissible; to go so far as to identify failing to lie in this case with homicide. These tactics are desperate exercises in special pleading. Counterpoised to them and to the intimate awareness of our psychological infirmity is our image of Jesus, from whose mouth nothing false proceeded (*CM* 18.36). To those who maintain that lying to the patient is not sinful, Augustine's reply is sympathetic but firm disagreement. Still, some types of sinful action are better or worse than others, and of instances of the same type of sin, some are performed for better or worse reasons (*CM* 8.19). Although all lies are sinful, some may be forgivable. So we should hope.

Coda

In a remarkable passage in *DM*, Augustine offers three possible glosses on Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 7:13, "Refuse to utter any lie, for the habit of lying serves no good" (*DM* 16-17.34). The Latin text that Augustine uses for the first part of the verse is *Nolite velle mentiri omne mendacium*. According to Augustine, on one interpretation, we have:

(I1) Do not utter any lie, and do not will to utter any lie.

A second interpretation maintains:

(I2) Do not utter any lie except a lie that (a) does not pertain to religious doctrine and (b) is such that a greater evil can be avoided by telling it than by telling the truth.

Finally, we have:

(I3) Do not utter any lies that are forbidden but only those lies that are permitted.

Augustine dismisses (I3) on grounds that its defenders simply misconstrue the *omne* in the Sirach passage as 'every' instead of 'any', thus supposing that the passage says 'Refuse to utter every lie' instead of 'Refuse to utter any lie'. Augustine could subscribe to (I3); it is, after all, compatible with his view that every lie is forbidden. But that very compatibility testifies to the emptiness and indeterminateness of (I3). (I2) is certainly more determinate. (I2) would allow for lying in the case of the ailing patient's dead child but would disallow blasphemous lying. We know already that Augustine rejects (I2). His attitude towards (I2) vis-à-vis (I1) is revealing. The Hebrew midwives who lied to the king of Egypt (Exodus 1:15-21) found favor with God because their lie was motivated by mercy and concern for the welfare of others. Their behavior was evidence of progress towards spiritual perfection. But it would be a mistake to think that their spiritual perfection would be aided by their cultivating a disposition to lie whenever they find themselves in a position fitting the pattern of conditions (a) and (b) in (I2). Quite the contrary. For, as the second part of the Sirach passage emphasizes, "the habit of lying serves no good." (I2) specifies a standard of truth-telling performance that many humans would find hard enough to meet. Even so, its demands are not as stringent as those of (I1). For those who take seriously the injunction to be perfect, as their heavenly father is perfect, (I1) sets the correct standard. The first part of (I1) forbids all full-blown, (D5)-type lies, including but not restricted to lies uttered to trap heretics, compensatory lies, and lies of mercy. In the second part of (I1), I have let *velle* stand as 'will', despite my earlier fussiness about desires versus intentions. We can, if we wish, split the second part of (I1) into two claims, depending on how we translate *velle*:

(I1′) Do not utter any lie, and do not intend to utter any lie.
(I1*) Do not utter any lie, and do not desire to utter any lie.

The second half of (I1′) forbids internal, (D4)-type lies, the lies that never register in the public forum but are nonetheless known by omniscient God.[16] The person who hews his behavior to the line of (I1′) will be charged with no lies, full-blown or internal. But if, as Augustine thinks, desire is the psychological antecedent of intention, the person who satisfies (I1*), who no longer has desires to lie—not even desires too weak to be effective movers to action—will have perfected herself even further.

Suppose that Remigio and Bernard Gui complete their pas de deux without a false step: neither of them resorts to telling a lie. Should we then conclude that nothing morally objectionable occurred in the interrogation? Remigio availed himself of some deceptive tactics. Is deception always morally wrong? Consider St. Athanasius, who was asked by his persecutors, who did not recognize him, "Is Athanasius close at hand?" His reply, "He is not far from here,"[17] gets high marks from the point of view of truth, low marks from the point of view of candor. But to assess the moral status of deception would require another paper, or book.

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NOTES

1. See Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 102-105. For useful discussion of other approaches to the moral problem of lying, see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers: What Can We Learn from Mill and Kant?", in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 16, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), pp. 309-361.

2. Written in 396. Augustine seems to have regarded *CM* as superseding *DM*. See *Retractationes* 1.27. But he also seems to regard the supersession as due to an improvement in writing clarity, not a change in philosophical position.

3. Saint Augustine, *Treatises on Various Subjects*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952).

4. For details see my "Abelard's Ethics: The Inside Story," in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, ed. Jeffrey Brower and Kevin Guilfoy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

5. See William E. Mann, "Inner-Life Ethics," in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 140-165, for details.

6. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 96. Williams adds: "I . . . believe that this is what most people understand by the word 'lie'; despite a very promiscuous use of it by some theoretical writers, it seems to me that in everyday use this is clearly its definition." Everyday users may be surprised to find out that by this account they take as a lie a *true* assertion believed to be false by its speaker; see the discussion below. In fact, it is a consequence of Williams's definition that whether a person has lied does not depend on the way the world is; it depends solely on what is in the speaker's head. For reasons I hope to make clear below, Williams's (D4) is more Augustinian than Augustine's (D3).

7. Such cases would include the student who, having no idea what the correct answer is on a multiple choice question, picks one at random, hoping that it is correct. I suppose that in an attenuated sense of 'deceive', the student is trying to deceive the teacher into thinking that the student knows the answer. The irony here is that if the student is lucky and picks what happens to be the correct answer, the analogue in this setting to telling the truth, that will go further toward deceiving the teacher than if the student picks an incorrect answer, the analogue to lying. In any event it seems a mistake to describe the case as a case of lying.

8. This kind of case is suggested by some of the ingenious examples that Augustine raises in *DM* 4.4. Case (1) also subsumes instances like Remigio's equivocation, with the proviso that the speaker assigns to the statement a different proposition from the proposition the speaker hopes will be assigned to it by the audience.

9. Having sympathy for an agent's behavior does not entail regarding the behavior as right. Augustine saw this clearly; see below.

10. See Mann, "Inner-Life Ethics," p. 145.

11. Both claims run contrary to versions of act-utilitarianism that maintain that the sole dimension upon which an action is to be evaluated morally is its consequences and that (as a consequence) no type of action is intrinsically sinful.

12. If this conjecture about Augustine's views is correct, then Augustine is committed to holding that Jesus' redemption of humankind was good but not intrinsically good. Some of the sting of that judgment can be removed by claiming that on some appropriate interpretation of 'could not have done otherwise', Jesus could not have acted for any other reason than love of humankind.

13. "Pretending," in J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 207.

14. Secular analogues of this style of argument surface in Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative and in Williams's "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

15. For recent variations of this sort of view, see Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philip L. Quinn, "Divine Command Theory," in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 53-73; and William E. Mann, "Theism and the Foundations of Ethics," in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William E. Mann (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, forthcoming).

16. Thus I take Augustine's treatment of the Sirach passage to vindicate the taxonomy of lies developed in the first section of this paper.

17. MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 336.